

**INNATE LANGUAGE CAPACITY AND THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT**  
**-A Case Study of Adult-Child Conversation**

**Yang Wei**

Department of Linguistics  
University of Victoria

1. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition of children is the product of two inseparable factors: the innate linguistic capacity of a child and the language environment in which the child is brought up. Over-emphasis of one and neglect of the other will not fully account for the obvious facts of real life. No child fails to learn a native language (with an exception of some brain-damaged children), and language is largely learned before the age of 5. Children are not taught language in any formal way, and yet the fabric of language is already intact by the time school begins (Kess, 1992). Also, no other animals, even the cleverest chimpanzees which are closest to us human beings, can acquire human language even under special training. In examining the attempts to teach language to apes, we see that language is probably species-unique (Gleason, 1989), and language is an important part of the demarcation line that we use to keep human beings in and nonhumans out. Biologists suggest that language is species-specific to the human race. They consider the human infant to be genetically programmed in such a way that it can acquire language (Doughty, 1974). Children are designed to learn and use language as part of their normal development as human beings, just like they are designed to stand upright rather than to move on all fours.

Children are born with an innate language capacity, but they do not realise this species-specific capacity entirely on their own. Even if we consider a normal infant generally programmed to learn language, there is still another condition which must be fulfilled before the language learning can take place. That is, the infant must be born and brought up in a proper human language environment and be stimulated by linguistic input. This environment is critical to the child, because the innate feature of using language in the child is just a capacity and the child must be provided with the necessary condition in which to realise the innate capacity. If no such environment is provided, the child may not be able to develop his capacity for language no matter how very well-programmed he might be. Studies of feral children's language ability (e.g., the case of Victor, (see Tartter, 1986)) clearly show that children brought up in a non-human environment do not have normal human language, and this seems to suggest that the human environment is critical to the development of child language acquisition. Therefore, parents play an important role in providing the child with the proper linguistic environment, as they are the first source of linguistic stimuli the child normally has after arriving in this human world. Parents or care-takers provide children with a remarkable linguistic environment very soon after children are born (or even before they are born). Conversation is a most common means of communication and parents tend to start conversation with children even when they are still at pre-linguistic stage. It is a cross-cultural finding that mothers treat infants as their conversational partners even though they know what they say cannot possibly be understood by the infants. In the course of language acquisition, children are always provided with a proper speech model to imitate or to aim at. From the first cry at birth through cooing, babbling to the full acquisition of the first language, the child usually follows a sequence of closely-related and sometimes overlapping stages from where we can find

that certain linguistic aspects are mastered earlier than others due to linguistic and cognitive constraints. Imitation is certainly an important process of language acquisition, but children do not learn everything through imitation. Therefore, when providing best suited models to a child acquiring language, adults should not expect the child to produce the correct speech sounds or sentences before the child reaches the appropriate stage. Natural maturation of the child and proper language environment will eventually take care of the complete and normal language acquisition process. This is why no normal children in a normal language environment fail to acquire language. This paper focuses on how adults act in providing a linguistic environment for children by means of conversation. I will venture to show different aspects of language development in mother-baby conversations by discussing conversations in Chinese between native Mandarin-speaking parents and their children. Some of the data I present in the paper came from my wife, Hongyan, who patiently recorded the dialogues, carefully transcribed them, and sent them to me from China.

## 2. THE NATURE OF MOTHER-BABY CONVERSATION

Since all human infants are endowed by their biological heritage with innate propensities that underlie language development, linguistic stimulation in a proper language environment is all they need for the realisation of those innate propensities. But when does the stimulation start? What role do parents play in setting up the immediate language environment for their infants? Mothers start communication with their babies through conversations when the infants are still too young to understand anything linguistically. Some mothers, consciously or subconsciously, even communicate with their babies while the babies are still in the womb. I once observed a pregnant woman stroking her unborn baby and saying gently: "Hi, baby, don't kick mommy". It is of course questionable as to whether this can be counted as "conversation" since conversation is defined to have two main features -- informational and reciprocal. Adult conversation is generally carried in a two-part system for the organisation of turn-taking. For example, a question requires an answer, greeting requires similar greeting, an invitation requires a reply, a compliment requires a reply, and so on. Turn-taking keeps the conversation going and thus information is passed. Conversations between mothers and babies do, in a way, consist of these two features though they are quite different from normal conversations. In mother-baby conversations, Mothers tend to talk in special ways, and try to give the conversational turn to the baby. Though infants do not understand the words that are being spoken to them, they do react to the speech. This is the sign that an infant is realising its innate linguistic capacity in the linguistic environment the mother is providing early in its life. By 3 months of age (see Snow, 1977), infants are found to begin showing vocal responsiveness to vocal and visual stimulation by their mothers. Subsequently, the way that an infant reacts to speech affects the behaviour of the speaking adults. It is a cross-cultural finding that mothers tend to take prelinguistic infants as their conversational partners even though they know that infants could not understand what is being said. Snow (1977) studied some special "conversations" between some English mothers and their young infants. The results show that mothers tend to speak in short, simple utterances, and respond to whatever infants do. The mother's conversational attitude toward pre-linguistic children is perhaps cross-cultural. Let us now go through a little conversation between a Chinese mother and her 53-day old baby son, Bangbang (Note: unless otherwise noticed, all the Chinese examples provided in this paper were recorded or observed from native Mandarin speakers in Shenyang, Northeast China).

(1)		
	Mother	Bangbang
	Bangbang, talk to mommy, OK?	nnnn
	OK?	aaauuu
	Ah, are you fine, Bangbang?	(burps)
	Are you fine?	
	Hmm?	
	Fine?	aaaaa
	Oh, fine. What a nice boy.	
	What is your name?	aaa
	Oh, your name is Bangbang, is that right?	
	Yes, you are Bangbang.	aaa aa
	Smile to mommy.	
	Ah---,you are smiling, aren't you?	aaa
	nnnn	aaaa
	eeee	eeee
	eeee, say it again.	(burps)
	Ah, you can burp.	
	Keep talking, will you?	(keeps burping)
	What a loud sound.	
	All right?	
	Yes?	
	Hmm?	
	Now, talk to me.	(smiles)
	Hmm, a nice smile.	nnn
	A big open-mouth smile.	aaa uuu
	Have a nice talk.	
	You have grandpa and grandma, right?	aaa
	Uncle and aunt, yes?	
	Answer me, Ok?	(burps) nnn
	Mmm, good answer.	nnn
	Be a nice boy, ah-?	
	Let mommy carry you.	(sneezes 4 times)
	Oh, boy, good!	
	Any more?	
	You can burp,	
	you can sneeze, you know everything,	aaaa aaaa
	right?	
	What are you thinking about?	nnn
	Tell me, will you?	aaaa (smiles)
	Good. That's good.	

The dialogue in (1) may suggest several points defining the nature of mother-baby conversation. Firstly, the utterances of the mother are short, simple and baby-centered. Most of the mother's sentences (over half) are questions. The rest are short answers, comments, simple instructions (like "talk to mommy") and imitation of the baby's vocalisations. The mother seems to understand that her conversational partner at this time is best communicated to in the basic question-answer pattern so that the child may be "introduced" to the first lesson of human conversation. Secondly, the mother responds to almost all the infant behaviours, such as burps, smiles, sneezes, vocalisations, and even the gentle kicks and other body movement of the baby. The mother even imitates the baby's vocalisation in order to induce more "talk" from the baby. This seems to suggest that the mother is not only taking the infant's responses as conversational contents on the baby's part, but also encouraging the infant to "take further steps" in the conversational activity. Obviously, the baby in the dialogue could not produce any real speech except for some natural behaviour like burps, sneezes, smiles and some sort of vocal articulation. (Note that the 'aaa' and 'uuu' sounds etc., in the dialogue may not be the same as adult speech sounds. They are transcribed that way to show that they are infant vocalisations of different kinds.) But the mother tries to respond to every "act" the baby makes with short answers or comments, and stimulates the baby with new utterances and repeated questions. Thirdly, unlike adult conversations in which one's major goal is to get his/her turn (see Snow, 1977), getting the baby to take his turn seems to be the major task of the mother in this conversation. Short questions like "Isn't it?" "Yes?" "OK?" or simply "Hmm?" occupy a large part of the mother's utterances, aiming to elicit specific responses, most often coos or smiles, from the baby. Each response of the baby is interpreted by the mother as a meaningful contribution from a conversational partner. Of course, the mother is not expecting the baby to say "My name is Bangbang" when asking "What is your name". Neither is she convinced that the burp and sneeze or any kind of the vocalisation from the baby mean anything linguistically. Still, the mother will treat the baby as her conversational partner and keep the conversation going. In doing so, the mother is providing the infant a nice immediate and direct linguistic environment in which the baby could take his first step into the realisation of his language capacity. In general, mother-baby conversation, in its special question-answer and turns-giving pattern, sets up a quite comfortable linguistic environment in which the baby could have plenty of one-to-one "primary lessons" of language acquisition. As Gleason (1989) puts it, the overall quantity of speech that the child overhears is not so important, but the quantity of direct adult-to-child input is. Conversations like this between parents and their very young babies do not just take place in just one particular culture, but probably in all human communities. In different cases, mothers may start conversations with their babies who are at the age of as young as 3 months, or even earlier in the infant-hood (if we suppose that the monologue to unborn babies is not considered as conversation). This seems to suggest that parents are the first language teacher to their babies in that they are the first (in most cases) to lead the baby to swim in the sea of language acquisition. Thus, mother-baby conversations play an important role in children's language development.

### 3. REDUPLICATION IN CONVERSATION

We have discussed the special characters of mother-baby conversation and have seen that mothers in general talk in special "turn-feeding" and "response-eliciting" patterns to children still so young that their ability to communicate is quite limited. There are some differences between the speech patterns which adults use among themselves and those they use in speaking to children. Adults "talk down" to children (Taylor, 1976). Normal adult conversation style will in no way resemble the speech pattern the mother uses in the above baby talk. In talking to young chil-

dren, adults may raise the voice, slow down the speed, shorten their sentences or repeat essential words. For example, reduplication is very common in Chinese baby talk, as in *Chi fan-fan* 'eat rice-rice' or *chuan xie-xie* 'put on shoe-shoe' (see Chao, 1967). To illustrate what is meant by the above statement, I present a little dialogue between a Chinese mother and her 2-year-old daughter, Jiajia. I will use the hyphen mark to indicate the reduplication in baby talk.

(2)

Mother:

Jiajia, lai chi fan-fan  
name come eat rice-rice  
'Jiajia, come and eat'

Jiajia:

mama fan-fan  
mama rice-rice  
'mother feed me'

Mother:

hao xiang-xiang  
good delicious-delicious  
'very delicious'

Jiajia:

mama wai-wai  
mama out-out  
'mother take me out to play'

Mother:

xian fan-fan, wanle wai-wai  
first rice-rice finish out-out  
'eat first, then I'll take you out'  
chi wanle fan-fan, mama gei chuan wa-wa,  
eat finish rice-rice mama give put on sock-sock  
'after eating, mother will help you put on socks'

.....

The mother here obviously goes out of her way to use "baby talk" which is full of reduplication. Note that the dialogue is patterned in such a way that certain morphemes or syllables of each sentence are reduplicated. In Mandarin baby talk, reduplication can fall into two types. The first type, as shown in the above dialogue, exhibits reduplication of a certain syllable (a certain character in written Chinese) which can be either a noun (as in *chi fan-fan* 'eat rice-rice'), a verb (as in *mama wei-wei* 'mother feed-feed') or an adjective (as in *hao xiang-xiang* 'very delicious-delicious'). In some cases, even prepositions are reduplicated (as in *mama wai-wai* 'mother out-out'). This kind of baby talk is not a pure creation of the baby, but it is largely taught by the mother. The following is an example of how the Chinese word for "rooster" is taught in reduplication.

(3)

Mother (translated)	Bangbang	
(pointing at pictures) What is this?	utterance gugu	target ji 'rooster'
Are you telling me how the big rooster sings?	enn	'yes'
This is "ji"	ji	'rooster'
Now say "ji-ji"	ji-ji	'rooster'

This seems to imply that mothers believe that reduplication of a certain speech sound (or a *syllable* in a more linguistic term) can provide emphasis of that sound and experience in encoding the relevant object or the situation to which that sound refers. For example, *fan-fan* is certainly not the standard adult expression for rice in Chinese, but it helps a young child to relate this particular sound to rice and remember it better than the one syllable sound *fan*. Therefore, the mother uses the "sound reduplication" strategy to train the child in the acquisition of both vocabulary and pronunciation. In Chinese culture, and it seems reasonable to suggest that this is so in other cultures, parents seem to believe that to remember one's own name is very important for the child, and reduplication of the name can help the child acquire the sound of his name faster. Thus, one can find many of Chinese children have a reduplicated "pet name" like Bingbing, Dongdong, Nannan, Jingjing, Lili, Maomao, etc. Not only are children's own names reduplicated, but also most of the immediate relatives of a child are called by the child in a reduplicated way. The following is a short list of some common reduplicated names in the northern dialect of Chinese.

(4)

baba	'father'
mama	'mother'
yeye	'grandfather'
nainai	'grandmother on father's side'
laolao	'grandmother on mother's side'
gege	'elder brother'
jiejie	'elder sister'
didi	'younger brother'
meimei	'younger sister'
jiujiu	'mother's brother'
shushu	'father's brother'
shenshen	'shushu's wife'
gugu	'father's sister'

Reduplication in baby talk is also a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural phenomenon. For example, in English one commonly finds a simplified or diminutivized vocabulary for terms relating to

food, toys, animals and body functions, as well as phonological simplification expressed by reduplication of syllables (*wawa, choochoo, booboo, tumtum*) (see Kess, 1992). In English, children's "pet names" can also be reduplicated. For example, Michael, the baby son of a Canadian colleague of mine, is called "Mimi" (/mimai/) first by Michael's little native English-speaking friends, and later by the family.

There is another type of reduplication in Mandarin that can be found in baby talk, namely, a syllable (normally a verb or an adjective) is reduplicated with *bu* 'no' in between to form a question. For example, *hao-bu-hao* 'good or not good' means "Is it good?" or "Is it all right?" The answer can be either *hao* (which means "good" or "yes") or *bu-hao* (which means "not good" or "no"). In a mother-baby conversation, this type of "syllable-*bu*-syllable" reduplication is often found in mother's questions to children. The following dialogue may help illustrate the point.

(5)		
	Mother	Bangbang (17 months)
	mama bao, hao-bu-hao?	hao
	'Let mommy carry you, OK?'	'yes'
	qu zhao baba, qu-bu-qu?	qu
	'Go and find Daddy, OK?'	'yes'
	Bangbang ting hua, xing-bu-xing?	xing
	'Bangbang be a nice boy, OK?'	'yes'
	ni guai-bu-guai?	guai
	'Are you nice or not nice?'	'nice'

In the above dialogue, the mother uses the "bu-" type reduplication and expects the baby to answer her questions by imitating the last syllable (the last word) of her question. In this way, the baby is not only provided with a certain repeated syllable as a model, but also learns a pattern to answer questions (which s/he will use even in adult conversation as a grown-up) by simply repeating the reduplicated syllable. It seems reasonable to suggest that baby talk or the way adults communicate with babies is not simply a culturally transmitted, functionless style, but rather a well-founded mode of speech that helps develop communication abilities in the child (Gleason, 1989).

#### 4. IMITATION IN CONVERSATION

We have seen in the previous section that mothers "talk down" to their children in baby talk where reduplication is a common speech pattern. However, in the course of adult-children conversation, parents also expect children to "talk up", that is, they set up certain models for children to copy so that children can gradually get closer to more acceptable patterns of speech communication. Imitation is found to take place cross-linguistically in early parent-child conversation. We should note that maturation of children takes much longer than that of most animals, and children also have to follow a sequence of language development steps along with their physical development. Parents are only too aware of this fact. They hence tend to continually monitor the children's degree of attention and understanding, and try to adjust their speech patterns in order that the children can keep their responses at optimal levels (see Snow, 1977). To maintain the linguistic environment for children at optimal levels, mothers believe that more specific linguistic stimuli

are necessary for children when they grow old enough to produce words. Imitation seems to be a common way to satisfy the need. Parents start to provide models for babies to imitate as soon as babies start to vocalise sounds. In the recording of the conversation between the above-mentioned 53-day old baby and his mother, we find that the mother tries to use gimmicks (different sounds which are similar to the baby's vocalisation) to get the baby's attention, hoping that the baby will vocalise more by way of imitation. Of course, babies younger than 2 months are not likely to be ready to imitate, and most of them can barely vocalise at this stage. But the models are already there in the babies' language environment. As the child grows physically and cognitively, parents will provide new models for the child to imitate, and always take care to match their input to the child's developing cognitive levels. For example, Mandarin speaking children at one-word level can not only differentiate the different tones in the language, but they can produce mono-syllabic words with these tones. Parents at this stage tend to exaggerate the tones when talking to their children in order to help the children better distinguish the tone differences. If we assume that the behaviour of contour tones can best be characterised by representing them as a sequence of level tones (see Kenstowics & Kisseberth, 1979), baby talk in Mandarin can best illustrate this point. Allow me to refer to the Mother-Bangbang conversation again. At 15 months, Bangbang learns to pronounce the one-syllable word *hao* 'good' (Tone 3) by imitating his mother who deliberately exaggerates the tone and lengthens the syllable in the following level pattern:

(6)		
	Mother	Bangbang
		(imitates)
	Say: "ha---a---a---o---o-- " 'good'	ha-a-o-o-
	[mid-low-low-mid-high]	

The mother certainly will not use this pattern when talking to adults or older children in normal conversation. She does this to her 15-month-old son just to show him how this particular sound is made so that the baby can produce this sound, through imitation, more accurately in his speech. This little piece of evidence seems to show that the mother is always acting as the linguistic model for the child so that the child can never be without a proper language environment.

When we listen to children talk, we find that they cannot pronounce some of the sounds clearly or correctly while their pronunciation is perfect with other sounds. This shows that in a given language, certain features of sounds are more difficult to acquire than others. This may be cross-linguistically true. For example, glides may be acquired earlier than liquids in languages like English and Chinese. A child may say /kwai/ for "cry" (see Kess, 1992), but it is unlikely the case that /rai/ is used for /wai/. This sequence of sound acquisition cannot be changed through imitation and reinforcement. The following dialogue between Bangbang (16.5 months) and his mother may illustrate this point.



(7)		
	Mother (translated)	Bangbang
	(pointing at pictures)	
	What is this?	utterance target yi li 'pear'
	Oh, what is a "yi"? Say "li". "li-", yes.	yi
	And this?	yueyang yueliang 'moon'
	What? Hmm, yueliang.	yueyang
	Who is this?	yaoyao laolao 'grandma'
	No, say "laolao" (laughs) All right.	yaoyao (confused)
	Who is this?	ayjiu erjiu '2nd uncle'
	"er-jiu" "er-jiu" Do you miss your uncle?	ay-jiu ay-jiu xiang 'miss'
	Say "hui lai" (= 'come back')	lai huilai 'come back'
	What is this?	dadao xiangjiao 'banana'
	"xiangjiao", and this?	dao tao 'peach'
	This?	bi pen 'basin'
	This?	bi bi 'pencil'
	Good.	

In the above short dialogue, we can notice some special features of the speech of this one-word stage child. All the answers are one-word long. Glides tend to replace liquids (*yi* for *li*, *ay* for *er*). Voiced stops replace voiceless ones at initial positions (*dao* for *tao* and *bi* for *pen*). Note also that Bangbang did produce a correct /l/ sound in *lai* 'come', which shows the child can potentially produce liquids and they have trouble producing them only because they have not yet come to the right step of the development. Interestingly, in another recording two weeks later, the child was

found to produce remarkably more liquid sounds and could say *laolao* 'grandma' and *lai* 'come' with no problem. Another observation of mine also shows that at least some children acquire front consonants earlier than back ones. Consider the following short dialogue between a Chinese mother and her 2-year-old son, Gelin.

(8)		
	Mother	Gelin
	Say "maoke" (= 'sunflower seeds')	maote
	No, not "maote", say "mao-ke-"	mao-te-
	Oh, let's come to this one.	
	You say "xuegao" (= 'ice-cream')	xuedao
	"xue-gao-"	xue-dao-

Three months later, Gelin was able to pronounce the same two words perfectly without much special training, although these words had been mentioned to him by the mother from time to time. The constant "model provision" seems to go along with the child's physical development, and this can probably be an example of the natural combination between the non-separable language capacity and language environment.

The acquisition of tone, an important phonological feature of Mandarin Chinese, is another aspect which shows how children develop their language ability. For example, on one occasion, Bangbang learned to pronounce a 2-syllable word *di-qiu* 'globe' (at the presence of a globe) with the correct tone (Tone 4 -Tone 2). When he went on to learn the next word *niu-nai* (Tone 2-Tone 3) 'milk', he was still holding to the tone pattern for *diqu*. That is, the child was applying the tone sequence of one word to another. This observation seems to suggest that (1) tone in Chinese is acquired separately from other phonetic properties (at least by some children) which seems to support the autosegmental hypothesis (see Kenstowicz & Kisseberth, 1979), and (2) children tend to over-generalise linguistic phenomena, including tones. From the above examples, we can see that mothers, no matter how far their children have developed linguistically, never forget to provide proper models. They offer corrections, or simply repeat the correct pronunciation, in order to emphasise on the difference between the child's mispronunciation and the target sound. This is like holding a baby to walk when it can just stand but cannot make steps. Though the holding itself cannot make the baby walk, it can at least show the baby what walking is like and perhaps promote the physical development of the baby.

On the other hand, although imitation is important, children do not learn everything through imitation. They have to go through those necessary developmental steps before they can fully acquire language. That is, the innate capacity of acquiring a language has to develop to the right stage to enable the child to follow the model provided in the language environment. These developmental steps, though in a relatively fixed sequence, may not be taken exactly one after another by the child, and many of them may overlap. In whichever step, the child can (always?) find a proper speech model provided by the adult who, just through conversation, will train the child to become an acceptable language user in the community. As Palermo (1978) puts it, the people around a child who is acquiring language are sensitive to the child's level of development and try to provide a linguistic environment which is ideally suited to language acquisition. This seems to be an innate capacity of humans in response to children: older children and adults invariably talk to younger

children differently than they do to adults. This innateness itself helps provide a better environment to language acquiring children. We can again see the close relationship between the innate language capacity of the child and the language environment around him. In general, imitation has many functions in child language, and it does help children learn (see Snow, 1983). Adults are of great help in providing the imitation models.

## 5. INNATE LANGUAGE CAPACITY AND LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

As I mentioned earlier, the innate language capacity of a child has to be realised in a proper language environment. But a good language environment does not mean that a child can acquire language without any constraints. In the course of language acquisition in early childhood, children must go through a sequence of steps before they can comprehend and produce language in an acceptable style. Children need time to overcome both cognitive constraints and linguistic constraints. As we discussed above, certain sounds or sentence structures (usually those easy to produce or use) are acquired earlier than others which are comparatively harder to produce and complicated in form. Parents at this stage use baby talk to provide models, encourage and guide the children to go through these steps. However, models far beyond the child's developmental level can only result in confusing the child. That is to say, the realisation of linguistic capacity needs just natural language environment, and over-promotion or over-stimulation will not help. Instead, adults have to reconcile the child's development with attention and acceptance. For example, when the child says "mi" or "milk" to mean either "That's milk" or "I want milk", the child can be talking about only a few salient and essential things. The mother has to be well aware of these few and be highly attentive to the child's needs and his utterances, and accept the child's utterance as grammatically multi-functional. A child's utterance like *mama fan-fan* 'mommy rice-rice' in Chinese is effective enough to mean either "Mother feed me" or "Mother is eating" or "It's mother's rice" to an understanding adult. The adult would "tolerate" such nonstandard style, and encourage the child with equally non-standard baby talk in order to keep the effective communication by which the child can exercise his linguistic ability. When the child is old enough to say "I want a glass of milk" or "Give me a bowl of rice", the conditions for the effective communication are no longer there and baby talk is no longer necessary. We can therefore say that baby talk is just a necessary step toward complete language acquisition. Baby talk appears naturally in adults conversation with children to help them develop their linguistic and cognitive abilities, and gradually disappears from the child's environment when he is comparatively mature both linguistically and cognitively. Over-expectation from a developing child will only disappoint the adult. I will use one more example to illustrate my point with a translated recording of a dialogue between a young Chinese mathematics lecturer and his 39-month-old baby son, Yanyan, who has barely learned to count from one to ten.

(9)

Father	Yanyan
Here are 2 trucks and there comes another one. How many are they?	3
Now here are 3 and there comes another. How many?	4

Plus another?	5
5 plus one more?	6
(excited) Good! My son can calculate now. How many are 5 plus 1 again?	7
Hnn? Here are 5 and there is 1, it should be 6, not 7, and you were right just now. Tell me again, how many are 5 and 1?	8
(laughs)	Yes, it is 8. (fluently) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Is that right?

In the above dialogue, one can notice that although the child can fluently speak out the numbers, he is not yet developed to the right cognitive level to match the numbers to the real objects. The father is disappointed only because he expects the child to do what he is cognitively unable to do. We can therefore infer from this example that language models set for a child must be at the child's optimal developing level, but not beyond it. Only in this way can the language environment be most effective for the child to realise his linguistic capacity. Chicken hatching requires two inseparable factors: the egg (not a stone) and proper temperature. Over-raising the temperature can in no way speed up the hatching process. The two inseparable factors of language acquisition are the innate language capacity of a child to acquire language and the proper and natural language environment around the child.

## 6. SUMMARY

In this paper, we have briefly discussed the two inseparable factors of language acquisition -- the innate language capacity of the child and the language environment. Parents tend to start providing children with the earliest and most suitable linguistic stimulation in order to help them realise their innate linguistic capacity. Baby talk is a cross-linguistic activity by which parents start and keep the adult-child conversation, through which children gradually learn the specifics of many aspects of the language they acquire. Reduplication is commonly found in the acquisition of both English and Mandarin Chinese, which may help children's language development. Imitation in general helps children learn, but it is certainly not the sole passage through which a child acquires language.

To conclude, adult-child conversation is important for language acquisition in that (1) it provides prelinguistic children with necessary linguistic stimulation which helps them to develop their innate language ability; (2) it provides young children with language models which they may use in future interaction with people in the community and (3) it guides children to go naturally through different steps of the development of language acquisition. If I may add the fourth point, it helps linguists to better study the issue of language acquisition.

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